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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000010

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#) [EU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: STATE TV LAUNCHES KURDISH CHANNEL

11. (C) Summary: This is a joint cable Embassy Ankara, Consulate Istanbul, and Consulate Adana. On January 1 the government-run broadcasting service Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) began official 24-hour Kurdish broadcasting on the new TRT 6. While some representatives from Kurdish and human rights organizations criticized the GOT decision as delayed and politically motivated, others viewed it as a late but positive step. Despite this move, severe restrictions remain on the use of Kurdish in public institutions. Until significant positive steps are made to address these limitations, TRT 6 will be criticized by many as an empty gesture. Nevertheless, TRT 6 represents a sea change in the GOT's treatment of the use of Kurdish in the public realm and is a step that many would not have believed possible a few years ago. End summary.

12. (C) On January 1 at 1700 Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, launched a new state-run television station featuring programming entirely in Kurdish, by saying "May TRT 6 be beneficial" in Kurdish. The GOT officially commenced TRT 6 (known colloquially as TRT Shesh, using the Kurdish word for six) after a week of test broadcasts of 24-hour Kurdish, Arabic, and Farsi programming. The station is not merely flirting with taboos, as did a previous law that allowed private stations to broadcast in Kurdish for only four hours a week, and even then with Turkish subtitles, preventing live broadcasts. TRT 6 appears to be off to a solid start with news programs, cultural shows, and documentaries, even inviting a Kurdish singer named Rojin to host a women's talk show, despite her songs having served as grounds to close television and radio stations which aired them in the past. Mehmet Celal Baykara of the Kurdish Cultural Research Foundation said he and other Kurds are happy with the station, noting that it "was a delayed but positive decision." He noted that while the different Kurdish dialects used in programming occasionally created confusion, the station itself was technically accessible and the content "will get better in time."

Election Ploy or Good-Faith Gesture?

13. (C) Reaction to the new station has been mixed. A range of our contacts and press reports see TRT 6 as an important step toward forging a more inclusive definition of democracy. Adnan Elci, the President of the Chamber of Commerce in Cizre, Sirnak Province, told us that the overwhelming majority of people in the Southeast are pleased with having a channel broadcasting in their mother tongue. Elci was impressed that a TRT 6 crew came to Cizre to conduct an interview with him, in Kurdish, which was accompanied by a tour of historical sites, the organized industrial zone, and Habur border gate. Attorney Sezgin Tanrikulu, president of

the Human Rights Foundation in Diyarbakir, believes that TRT 6 represents a positive, vital, and meaningful development for Turkey, but pointed out to us that he is still scheduled to stand trial on February 5 for printing a calendar/notebook in Kurdish. Another contact pointed out that there is no legal or constitutional basis for broadcasting in Kurdish right now; in essence the GOT may have put the cart before the horse.

14. (C) Some members of the Kurdish-based Democratic Society Party (DTP) have praised the station, though were careful to claim it as fruit of the struggle of the Kurdish people, not a victory for the Turkish government. The DTP Provincial Chairman for Ardahan, Omer Yilmaz, also noted that TRT 6 is only one step toward a peaceful solution to Kurds' discontent. Emrullah Cin, the DTP mayor of Viransehir in Sanliurfa Province was much more skeptical, viewing the channel as a propaganda vehicle of the Turkish state and a thinly disguised election ploy. He pointed to the empty AKP track record on Kurdish issues before the election season and raised the issue of pending court cases against those who have used "nonexistent" Kurdish letters and his own futile attempts to name three municipal parks after local Kurdish citizens. On the other hand, the leader of the parliamentary opposition, Republican People's Party Chairman Deniz Baykal, told the press that the AKP had gone too far. In his opinion, Kurdish broadcasting should be a private endeavor, not a state-sponsored one. He expressed concern that every ethnic group in Turkey would subsequently request its own television station and claimed that, instead of reconciling Kurds and the Turkish state, TRT 6 will encourage ethnic

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identities and further divide the population, saying AKP leaders "either know they are doing a very dangerous thing or don't know what they are doing."

As a Tool in Counterterrorism and State-Building

15. (C) TRT 6, if successfully utilized, may also serve well to counteract PKK propaganda in the Southeast. Tanrikulu noted that PKK elements, predictably, do not view TRT 6 positively. Ostensibly, this is because it rivals their previous broadcast monopoly. (Comment: Evidence suggests that Roj TV is a front organization for the PKK. End Comment) It also offers would-be recruits an ideological alternative, and detracts from the legitimacy of PKK battle cries for language recognition. He also observed the importance of recognizing the lack of outrage from Turkish citizens in nationalistic pockets dotting western Turkey in response to the new channel. Serdar Sengul, foreign relations advisor to Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir, said that in the past the Turkish state referred to people in the East and Southeast as "underdeveloped Turks;" with new programs on TRT 6, these regions are now being perceived as Kurdish regions. The Turkish state should be careful to keep the advantage of providing Kurds with an alternative message to the PKK's, sensitive to the concerns of its primary audience.

16. (C) Sengul also said that the existence of a state-sponsored Kurdish channel was nothing short of revolutionary, since Kurds have been struggling to have their language recognized in Turkey for more than 80 years. He can see the change immediately, he said, noting that the gas station he usually frequents now has employees huddled around TRT 6 instead of the usual diet of music videos from Kral TV. Diyarbakir's Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Mehmet Kaya also acknowledges the transformation this represents, but reminded us that "the government waited for three years to open the Kurdish channel. If they wait two years more for broader language rights and two more years for other basic rights, it is not going to help solve the issue." The novelty of TRT 6 is bringing in a high number of viewers now, in his mind, but if the content is too propagandistic or not relevant, the station may prove to be a false start.

17. (C) Television broadcasting notwithstanding, other restrictions remain on the use of Kurdish in the public sphere, including bans on the use of the letters W, Q, and X -- present in Kurdish but not in Turkish -- in publications, signage, and official documents. While there is no Constitutional provision banning the use of Kurdish, Article 58 of Law 298 of the Basic Principles of Elections and Article 8/13 of Law 2820 on Political Parties prohibit the use of language other than Turkish in election propaganda and by political parties. However, Kurdish is effectively banned in political speech, in the courts, in universities, and other public institutions, and until TRT 6, in the broadcast media. Due to the ban on specific letters, the English language daily newspaper "Hurriyet Daily News" had to register as "Hurriyet Daily NevS" (note "v" in "news" vice "w") and court prosecutors occasionally open court cases against companies, NGOs, and political organizations seemingly at random for using one of the restricted letters in their name or literature. DTP deputy Akin Birdal said such discrepancies present a dilemma for the Turkish state, but he is optimistic about the future and does not doubt that the GOT will take more steps. As a potential solution to the concern that education in the Kurdish language is nonexistent, Yusuf Ozcan, the head of the Higher Education Board (YOK) president, disclosed to the press that his organization is preparing to open Kurdish language departments in universities in Ankara and Istanbul and would begin approving Kurdish classes as elective courses at the university level.

18. (C) The ban on the use of Kurdish in parliament and in public speeches resulted in the arrest and convictions of hundreds of ethnic Kurdish politicians and public figures in 2008. The head of the Turkey Human Rights Association, Yavuz Onen, said a state-run channel in Kurdish is not the cure for problems and is politically motivated. "Local authorities must be allowed to deliver services in other languages. The state allows Kurdish TV on the one hand, but opens

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investigations against mayors who send bayram (holiday) greeting cards in Kurdish." In February 2008 the DTP sub-provincial chairman in Istanbul's Fatih district, Mehdi Tanrikulu, was convicted for speaking Kurdish during judicial proceedings in 2007 and sentenced to a five month imprisonment. Kurdish remains prohibited in other public institutions. In early 2008, the Ministry of Justice reportedly distributed a memorandum asserting that speaking in any language other than Turkish was forbidden in prisons by Article 88 of the 1996 Prison Regulations law. While Turkish dailies reported on January 5 that the Minister of Justice Sahin gave instructions to lift the ban on the use of Kurdish in prisons, such prohibitions continue to prevent inmates from writing letters or speaking to relatives not literate in or able to speak Turkish.

Comment

19. (C) TRT 6 is a significant benchmark for both the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s commitment to reform and for the objectivity of the judicial system. Erdogan and the AKP have come under criticism for using the Kurdish language as a political tool to boost their sagging popularity, particularly in the Southeast where DTP poses a sharp challenge. AKP can prove its commitment to truly mainstreaming Kurdishness by following through on promises to allow Kurdish in universities, prisons, and other government buildings. Doing so would burnish Turkey's image with the EU and a host of human rights organizations which have been commenting that 2009 will be a critical year for Turkey. But whether AKP passes or fails this test is, in some ways,

immaterial; TRT 6 would be a difficult step to reverse without disappointing a large sector of the voting public, something very few political parties would undertake lightly.

Even without government support, TRT 6 will make even more obvious the inconsistencies in state language policy. In and of itself, it will not deter continued efforts by nationalist prosecutors attempting to target organizations and individuals based on Kurdish language use through selective prosecutions. TRT 6 will, however, be an obvious argument in bolstering their defense, and therefore will serve as a touchstone for measuring the impartiality and objectivity of the Turkish judicial system.

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